

# CODEL HOEKSTRA

## A perspective on Operation Enduring Freedom

Congressman Pete Hoekstra

Preparing for a congressional mission (CODEL) requires extensive research, which can sometimes take a much time as the trip itself. In this case, the suggested reading list is more than 2000 pages. Fortunately one of the books was actually classified material nine months ago, which I have already read. I also read a second book on the list over the weekend, along with additional briefing documents. The remainder will provide reading material while I am on the plane.

One of the objectives of the trip was to express appreciation to our troops for the efforts they are undertaking. In planning the trip, all delegation Members expressed a strong desire to meet with individuals from their districts and states. My own desire was made stronger by a number of people from West Michigan who contacted me with information about their family members who I might encounter on the trip. This included a woman who I met at the Fremont parade, two sets of parents who have sons at the embassy in Moscow, a couple of parents who had sons in Afghanistan, and the mother of Colonel Judy Fedder, from Manistee, who commands all U.S. forces in the Azores. What immediately becomes clear is that many people from West Michigan are involved very directly in the war on terrorism.

In an effort to provide West Michigan residents the opportunity to express their feelings and sentiments for our troops, we came up with the idea to have large banners produced that constituents could sign. The end result I delivered five, 15x 3 banners full of signatures and personal expressions of appreciation to our



A young West Michigan resident sends a message of support to the troops.

troops. I thank everyone who took time to sign the banners for their great expression of support for our military forces in the region.

Another part of preparing for this CODEL was to outline links between the Second Congressional District and Afghanistan. I met with officials of International Aid in Spring Lake to understand their involvement in Afghanistan. They have helped a health clinic become operational, but because the location is outside Kabul, I will not be able to visit the site. A small start-up business in the District called to brief me on their product, a machine that makes bricks inexpensively and is ideal for low-tech environments. I

promised to report back to them on potential usage in Afghanistan. Their machine is interesting and, if used in Afghanistan, would create jobs in West Michigan. I always find it fascinating the many links between the Second District and these remote corners of the world.

And finally, since I am leading this CODEL, I am responsible for planning the itinerary and dealing with last minute glitches. The last few weeks have included finalizing and fine-tuning the trip, and adding one more member who expressed interest in going at the last minute. Among the little things I get to do, seating assignments on the plane. Everything is ready and I think it is all set. Getting ready for these trips is a lot of work but, in the end, you need to do it if the CODEL is going to be worthwhile.

DAY 1: Wednesday, August 21, 2002

Departure day has arrived. Yesterday, Diane and I took our daughter Erin back to school in Wheaton, Illinois, so I left from Chicago early this morning. I can tell Diane is not excited about me going on this trip. Four weeks of people saying “be careful” and “we’ll be praying for you” have raised doubts with her about how good of an idea this is. Diane drops me off at O’Hare. They told me it would take 1-¾ hours to get my ticket, check my bags and get through security. It took less than five minutes. This is an airport or an airline that gets it right, processing passengers quickly and courteously. The flight to D.C. was uneventful.

The final few hours in D.C. were hectic. Four weeks of accumulated miscellaneous items that the D.C. staff wants to cover, a meeting with the Ambassador from Morocco, and a meeting with the Department of State to get an update and latest briefings on Central Asia. Making sure I have all the materials I need. How do I e-mail from Afghanistan and other last minute details?

At 5 p.m. we depart Capitol Hill. All eleven members are present. This is a great bi-partisan group. We depart Andrews at 5:58 pm, two minutes ahead of schedule. These Navy people are punctual. I am impressed and hope this sets the precedent for the entire trip.

On today’s itinerary: Newfoundland, Ireland and Moscow. Though it is



The Members, military and professional staff of CODEL Hoekstra in front of their Air Force C-9.

comfortable, this is an older plane, with a very small fuel tank. Newfoundland and Ireland are just refueling stops. Our first meetings will be in Moscow, with briefings on Russia's experience with radical Islam and Afghanistan. Because Russia's experience with terrorism is more extensive than ours, this is an appropriate way for us to begin our fact-finding mission. Tomorrow (Thursday) is a National Day of Remembrance in Moscow due to the tragic loss of life in a helicopter crash in Chechnya earlier this week. The cause of the crash is yet to be determined.

DAY 2: Thursday, August 22, Moscow

We land in Moscow. So this is it! The "evil empire." Russia. It doesn't appear as frightening as what the Cold War made it seem. They have a strange airport terminal building, and the buildings on the way from the airport are drab. Traffic is terrible. There are actually cars driving on the sidewalk to avoid traffic.

I find several West Michigan connections in Moscow. John Beyrle meets us at the airport. He is from Muskegon and is the second-highest ranking person at our Moscow embassy. Sgt. John Scholten is the Marine guard that meets us at the embassy. His dad stopped me at church on Sunday. Yes, I remember to give him the Rolos. Meeting people from home is a great way to start this trip.



The entrance to Red Square in Moscow.

Russia is key. Its importance, both positively and negatively, is highlighted continually in the countries the delegation visits. It faces key economic and political challenges, in addition to fighting a war in Chechnya. Because of their knowledge and experiences with terrorism, Russia is a major player whose views America can benefit from.

From an economic standpoint, we learn Russia has a long way to go in its economic transformation. Its infrastructure is decaying, including water, sewer and gas lines. In fact, gas explosions because of leaks are not uncommon. Its population is expected to decrease from 130 million to slightly over 100 million in the coming years. If its

economy grows at a rate of 8 percent a year for the next 15 years, the per-capita income will be equal to that of Portugal (\$10,890 in 2001). Still, with all the problems, for the first time in 10 years, the poll question, "right track vs. wrong track" went positive for the first time this past January.

President Vladimir Putin also faces political challenges. Putin was elected to re-establish internal order as well as Russia's role in the world. He has made significant progress on

the first, and is working on the second. While President Putin works on these political issues his primary focus will continue to be economic reform and development.

During our briefings the discussion turns to the war on terrorism and why the U.S. will need to be engaged with Russia. Russia has a long history of fighting terrorism and fighting in Afghanistan. It also has strong political and economic ties with Iran and Iraq, and a keen interest in U.S. relations with the former Soviet Republics. The U.S. has much we can learn from Russia, we have areas where we may be able to work together (this will be challenging to say the least), and we have areas that are going to need considerable discussion because Russia may perceive them to be a threat. This was a good initial stop for our CODEL.

Remnants of the Cold War still remain in Russia. Our briefings are in the infamous U.S. embassy. The bottom five floors you can assume are extensively bugged. Conversations on the other floors still need to be discrete unless you have been told that you are in a secure room.

Our day continues with a casual buffet in John Beyrle's residence and then on to a tour of Red Square and the Kremlin. Red Square highlights all the contrasts of Russia today. On

one side is Lenin's Tomb. During the Soviet days leaders would stand on the building watching troops and military equipment parade by.

Behind the tomb is the Kremlin.

Opulent. As someone said, "If you ever wanted an excuse for a revolution just walk through the Kremlin." At the other end of the Red Square is St. Basil Cathedral. It is beautiful. The communists turned it into a museum and only recently has it been reopened as a church. Across from Lenin's tomb is the

largest department store in Russia, with clear capitalistic merchandising (i.e. Christian Dior). Yes, Russia today

is a world of contrasts. Contrasts that make it difficult for it to evolve and contrasts that, given the complexity of the country, will make it difficult for others to work with them.



Lenin's Tomb with the famous Kremlin Clock Tower in the background.

DAY 3, August 23

Hey, up and at it early. I try something new. One of the TV stations has loaned me a digital camera for use on the trip. They'll use the footage and also give me a 5-7 minute professional video that I can use with schools and other groups. That's a fair deal. I go down early and get John Beyrle on film talking about Russia and then have John film me.

This TV station may regret the day they gave me a camera. It is on to the airport for the almost four-hour flight to Uzbekistan.

The arrival in Tashkent begins a more typical day for a CODEL. The first impressions of a country are always fascinating. What do you remember of the ride in from the airport? In Uzbekistan, two things stood out. Tashkent was nicer than I expected it to be. In some ways it appeared nicer than Moscow. There were at least some new buildings. Secondly, they do an interesting thing in Uzbekistan. They couldn't afford all the new construction, so a number of buildings have false fronts. The classic example that we drove by was a building with a mostly tinted glass front – a contemporary design. Just behind the glass front was the old building, just like a Hollywood set. A reminder that reality may be different than it appears.

We get to the embassy and it has Herman Miller furniture. It's one of the many reminders of West Michigan that have popped-up on this trip. We begin with the standard country brief. President Islam Karimov has served two, seven-year terms as President. Like other countries in the region, water is a critical issue for Uzbekistan.

As a former Soviet Republic, Uzbekistan is unique. It has shown a willingness to chart an independent course in foreign policy. It has been supportive of the U.S., and allowed us to use bases there from early on in the war against terrorism.

The Uzbeks are concerned we will pull our forces out early, before stability is established in the region. Their concerns are not unfounded; we have been down this road before in this region. If we do it again, Uzbekistan will be among the losers. It will have angered the region's traditional powers, the Chinese and the Russians, whose bases in this former Soviet Republic we are using.

The U.S. is trying to do everything it can to dispel this concern. Just today, USAID, DEA, General Franks and 11 members of congress will be in Tashkent. It is clear the U.S. decision to leave Afghanistan in 1989 after the defeat of the Soviet Union is a decision that has caused many to question the commitment of the U.S. to the region. But, with this type of demonstration of interest, we are beginning to send the clear message: The U.S. is here to stay.

Uzbekistan is important for many reasons – It shares a border with Afghanistan, it charts its own foreign policy, and it has been a loyal ally and allowed use of its military bases. Unfortunately, within its border are deadly anthrax depositories – nothing large, but still a concern. The U.S. wants, and it is in our interest, for this relationship to mature and expand.

After the country briefing, the delegation leaves to meet with the foreign minister and the defense minister. This will be the first time I take the lead in a meeting with foreign leaders. My earlier trip to the Middle East and my prep work pay off as we have a good and open discussion. Most of the discussion goes through an interpreter, which makes it a little tougher. I did work up quite a sweat, though I am not really sure if it was nerves

or I was just plain hot. The ministers shared their perspective on Afghanistan's internal security priorities: A centralized police force and national army, internal political compromise, economic reconstruction, and a continued focus on the war on drugs.

External pressures that may develop center on political mischief and exploitation that might come from Iran and Russia. What is their intent in Afghanistan? It may very well be in conflict with U.S. interests and those of President Hamid Karzai. The U.S. has many issues on which we must be active if we are to be successful. We move on to meet with the President.



Hoekstra leads a meeting with CODEL Members and Uzbek Ministers.

Our meeting with President Karimov goes longer than an hour and a half. The President is a very engaging individual and many view him as the best strategic thinker in the region. The meeting is again done with a translator. In a slightly awkward moment, one of our members compliments the work of the interpreter. It is difficult to understand whether the President actually perceives this as an insult to him.

I introduce the members of the delegation, including Jim Barcia from the great state of Michigan. The President asks, "Why do you say great?" It becomes a point of humor as the meeting progresses. The President begins the meeting with a 35-minute opening statement. I respond thanking him for Uzbekistan's friendship and support, and express the need for Uzbekistan to continue economic and political reforms, and to address human rights issues. I also indicate that the U.S. will stay in Afghanistan, and the region, to finish the job this time. The President then takes questions until all the issues have been covered.

Among the highlights of our conversation: President Karimov believes the war in Afghanistan is basically over and America has won. He believes we must keep the military pressure on and begin economic recovery. He believes economic assistance should focus on rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure. After 25 years of war, the highway system has been destroyed. Unless the regions of the country are reconnected, it will be impossible to rebuild the nation. Given the number of refugees that have moved back to Afghanistan, we need to ensure that humanitarian aid is provided to ensure they survive the winter. If the aid isn't forthcoming, we sow new seeds for terrorism.

He points out that they have fought the war on drugs at their border. The drugs they have stopped were intended for the West, not their people. Had they chosen, assisting in the distribution and transportation systems for illegal drugs could have been a lucrative business for them.

The discussion also covers human rights and political reform. They point out that democracy in America stands on the shoulders of generations of Americans, over 200 years of evolving practice. They profess to be committed to reform but after being under communist control they assert it is unreasonable to hold them up to U.S. standards immediately.

The meeting wraps up with Bob Schaeffer from Colorado. The President remembers Bob from six weeks ago when Bob was the last questioner in another CODEL, and the only one to bring up the human rights issues. This time Bob compliments the President on what is happening in his nation and invites him to the National Prayer Breakfast. I invite him to Michigan to find out why it is great!

We leave the palace. Jim Barcia and I host a press conference. It is very well attended. We reinforce the points we made with the President and take questions. Why didn't we meet with members of the parliament? Where else is the CODEL traveling? After 20 minutes the press conference is over. The reporters give us a round of applause. The U.S. media could learn from them (Just kidding).

We close the night at a great building, the foreign ministry. It is an absolutely beautiful former hunting lodge. We are guests of the ministers we met with earlier in the day. General Franks also attends. Typically, receptions end when the guests decide to leave, and an hour is acceptable, so I promise Mark Green from Wisconsin we will be out in 62 minutes. The food is great and discussions begun earlier in the day continue. Sixty-one minutes later, we are on our way back to the hotel. You have to keep the members happy.

Day 4 – August 24

This is shaping up to be a long, but awesome day. We'll meet the troops, be in Afghanistan, and meet with President Karzai. We leave the hotel at 6 a.m.

We start the day on a C-130 to K2 (Karshi Khanabad). It's our introduction to the plane that will be our home for much of the day. This is doing hard time. Look at the pictures.

People, banners fit where they can on the C-130.



The plane does defensive maneuvers as it lands at K2, descending rapidly to touch down. The end result – you feel like you've just taken that first steep slope on a very big roller coaster.

It's hot and dirty, and you see right away why our troops are so special. We have breakfast with them. John Mast from Hudsonville, MI is there. We are both glad to see a friendly West-Michigan face.

I'll call his parents when I get home. I'll have a long list of phone calls that I'll need to make when I get back to Michigan. I'll also have a long list of stories to tell about the great jobs these people are doing and the sacrifices they are making. Sacrifices like being gone on long deployments, National Guard personnel and Army Reservists on long deployments, wedding plans delayed, kids birthdays missed. I hand out my first banner to these guys. They love it.



Hoekstra stands with John Mast and Brad Warsop after breakfast at K2.

While the food isn't bad, the living conditions? They live in tents, sleep on cots and some are concerned about heavy metals in the drinking water. There is nothing pretty about this place. It is definitely a war zone.

We get a windshield tour of the base and head into a briefing.

Next stop, Bagram, Afghanistan. Flight time is one hour on a C-130 and we are running late. The stop at Bagram will need to be shortened so we can make our scheduled lunch with President Karzai. As you fly over Afghanistan you begin to appreciate how difficult the terrain is. It is absolutely desolate and mountainous, and you can see how someone could hide for years here. We meet our troops, hand out banners and walk briefly through the base. It is one big tent city. Afterwards, it is on to Kabul, which is a 30-minute flight.

Kabul International airport? Right. What a mess. A crumpled large passenger plane sits at one end of the airport. It was destroyed in the war with the Soviets.

We use armored Suburbans for travel



The delegation passes a bombed-out building on the road into Kabul.



into Kabul. The city is in shambles – bombed-out buildings, bullet holes, amputees, and many women still in burqas. Still, reconstruction is beginning, all of which is being done by hand. Is this a sign of hope?

Traffic is very light. Our drivers practice defensive measures, which means they disobey whatever traffic laws may exist and just keep moving quickly through the city. We get to the embassy. The Marines are there to meet us. Razor wire, bunkers and barricades serve as another clear indication this is a war zone. We only receive a brief country overview and then it is on to the meeting with the President.

The security for President Karzai is provided by U.S. troops. They have a very impressive arsenal. Because the President speaks perfect English, this meeting flows easier than the meeting in Uzbekistan. The President talks about how Afghanistan has



President Karzai discusses rebuilding Afghanistan with Hoekstra and other CODEL Members.

grown in size; it takes longer now to get from one end of the country to the other because the highways have been destroyed. A trip that should be completed in an hour-and-a-half now takes eight. He reiterates Karimov's point that you can't build a nation if its pieces aren't connected by the infrastructure. He speaks positively about his nation and its people. While outsiders focus on the warlords, he reminds us that no Afghan voice has been raised to divide the country. He talks about the resiliency of the Afghan people who want to rebuild their nation after 25 years of people trying to destroy their heritage – first Russia, then the

Taliban. He knows the task is immense but believes the people can do it. After 25 years of war he believes that the Afghan people still understand their heritage. I hope he is right. The relative calm that the Afghan people have enjoyed the last few months is the longest period of "peace" that they have had in nearly three decades.

He's proud of the progress they have made increasing educational opportunities for all their children. He's proud of the progress they are making in providing health care. He outlined positive economic reforms he plans to implement. He actually gave us a timetable that was not available publicly, including the specific steps that his country would be taking.

We move our discussion into another room so that we can have lunch. Our one-hour scheduled meeting stretches to more than an hour-and-a-half. The discussion covers a wide range of issues, but the President is optimistic because of his belief in the Afghan people. He talks about the refugees coming home, beginning to rebuild, planting their

vineyards, planting flowers and putting up tents. He's optimistic that foreign aid will arrive to deal with the looming humanitarian crisis as winter sets in, and he is optimistic because of the "reverse brain drain." Intellectual elites and professional Afghans are coming back to help rebuild the country. Like the Uzbeks, he wants America to stay.

After the Presidential visit most of the group heads to west Kabul to witness the level of destruction there and visit a school and a clinic. I leave to get a windshield tour of Kabul and an intel briefing. The other group cuts the clinic visit after security heard an explosion. They are unsure as to whether it was a land mine, but one of the security personnel thought they saw a missile. My quick tour of Kabul shows this is going to take a long time to rebuild! The intel brief is very informative.

A Marine stands guard in front of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. A West-Michigan signed banner hangs in the background.



We meet back at the embassy where we present the banners to the Marines. We hold a group press conference to discuss key points. It sounds like nation building. I've always been skeptical of nation building because I believe it is very difficult, and we do not have a very good track record. Now it sounds like I'm advocating it. I'm not sure there is an alternative. This is going to be tough.

It's back to a C-130. In five hours and 15 minutes we will land in

Bahrain. This will make it about eight hours on C-130s today. Some folks actually lay on the metal deck and sleep. I go up front to the cockpit. The crew loves this assignment. Tonight, they'll stay in a hotel, not the restricted base in Pakistan.

As it turns dark the crew hauls out the night vision goggles. Wow. If you look into the sky with your naked eyes at 20,000 feet there are a lot of stars. With a pair of night vision goggles on, it is a whole new world. The sky becomes absolutely bright with more stars than you can imagine. The range of vision is about forty miles. It really is a great product.

After the long flight, we have dinner at our hotel. As dinner is just about finished Dr. Palma comes to our table. He is from Ravenna, MI. He's at the hotel, but he is normally stationed on the U.S.S. George Washington. A patient required some special care, so he escorted him to Bahrain. It has been a long day. Time to go to bed.

Day 5 – August 25,

Country briefing at 7:45 a.m.; meet with the Foreign Minister at Nine. The meeting with the Foreign Minister is good. He brings up two issues that are expected and one that is not. We expected to talk about Israel and the Palestinians. He stresses that they believe we are unfairly biased towards Israel. I encourage him with what I learned in my earlier Middle East trip. As allies we need to co-operate and exercise leverage where each nation has it. It is the responsibility of America to encourage Israel to pursue peace and freedom, for the Arab world to pressure Chairman Arafat. From my earlier trip, however, I know that a number of Arab leaders do not believe that there will be peace as long as Arafat remains in power.

I also emphasize that serious peace negotiations can only begin after the suicide bombings stop. It is obvious that while there is agreement on the desired outcome there is not agreement on tactics.

The same scenario plays out on Iraq. Though we agree on the need to restrict or eliminate weapons of mass destruction in the region and the threat posed by Iraq, there may be disagreements on tactics. It is very clear that we need to make an increased effort in communicating with our friends.

The final, and unexpected, issue is student visas. Many young people from Bahrain study in the U.S. It appears that processing student visas is a laborious process and many students will not be going to school in the states to continue their education. I've had one hearing on student visas since Sept. 11 and have been planning another one. This is good info to have.

Afterwards, we visit troops and hand out banners before we head to Oman. No more C-130, we are back on our own plane.

In Oman we get a quick base overview, discuss military capabilities, and tour a medical facility. Before we leave Oman, we get briefed on what we need to do on landing and taking off from the carrier.



A Navy COD, a C-2 Greyhound, lands on the deck of the U.S.S. George Washington.

It's going to be great. This afternoon we'll go from 130 m.p.h. to zero in less than two seconds (saying one potato two equals two seconds) as our COD (carrier onboard delivery) lands on the deck of the U.S.S. George Washington. Tomorrow we'll do the reverse, from zero to 130 in less than two seconds. This will be some ride.

The COD, a C-2 Greyhound, is a relatively small plane. It must seat around 36 and there are only two small windows along the fuselage. It's like riding inside a tin can. Something to think about: How many people would get into a plane if they handed you a life vest and helmet as you boarded and told you that you had to wear them?

After a 45-minute ride to the carrier, we make an unbelievable landing. I have never felt that kind of sensation before. We step onto the deck of the ship, walk through a double row of sailors and meet the Admiral of the battle group and the ship commander. We head inside immediately for a briefing. I notice Herman Miller Ergon chairs in the briefing room. My second job at Herman Miller was as product manager for Ergon chairs. We move through the capabilities of the battle group and what they have accomplished. It is very impressive.

We get back into the life vests and helmet we wore when we flew out to watch aircraft recovery operations (landings). We stand on the flight deck about 40 feet from where planes land. They come in at 130-150 m.p.h. and the tailhook needs to catch one of three cables on the deck. The target area for the plane is about 40 feet long. The third plane to land catches the last cable. The cable comes within five feet of where we are standing. As they touch down the pilots need to fully gun their engines in case the tailhook skips over the cables and the plane needs to take-off again. It's amazing; these cables need to stop fighters going at full throttle!

The deck is a beehive of activity as the planes land. Immediately after the plane lands one team moves the cable back into place. Another begins moving the plane off the runway. A third crew begins directing the next plane. Safety and fire officials are at their locations. Consider this as the equivalent of putting all your airport personnel (except the passenger screeners) onto a thousand ft. ship.

The average age of the sailors is under 25. They look about 17. These kids are talented. We head down for dinner with the sailors. We eat the same chow they do, although they later tell us they don't necessarily eat that well every night. There are about 150 sailors from our combined districts and states for dinner. I'm joined by Chad Carlson, a young man from Holland, and a graduate of West Ottawa who now guides the planes back onto the ship. Chad has a daughter who turns three this week. Torey Johnson is from Muskegon and a graduate of Muskegon Heights High School. He works in the nuclear plant, where his job is to make sure that this ship attains the 40 m.p.h. that it needs to too launch and land planes. Tim Barney is from Muskegon and a graduate of Muskegon High School. He manages the staff of about 150 electricians that ensures the ship stays powered. Daniel Iadonisi and Jeff Stanaszek also join Jim Barcia and myself. We have a great dinner with steak, baked potatoes, corn and cherry pie. We also have a great conversation. I have all their contacts back home and will call their families when I get home.

At the end of the dinner we unroll nine of the banners for the Ship's Company, a football signed by the Green Bay Packers and a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol. We express our appreciation to them for what they have done and what they are doing. I also thank them for the sacrifices that they are making, especially the separation from loved ones.



Hoekstra and Congressman Barcia join sailors from Michigan holding a banner signed by Second Congressional District residents.

The XO presents us with a flag that has flown over the ship. We break up, take some photos with the banners and I shoot some video of my constituents. Maybe Michigan TV will carry some of this footage as a human interest. I hope so, otherwise I'll make copies and send it to the families.

We now break into groups for tours of the ship. It really is a self-contained city of almost 6000 people. They have a small hospital that just performed an appendectomy. They have a dental clinic. They have a ship's store and multiple mess areas, some of which will be open 24 hours per day. We go through the sleeping quarters. Most bunks are stacked two or three high. Sailors get storage under the mattress and one small locker. We go to the hangar deck. Wow again! It is massive and busy. Mechanics working on the planes, guys playing ping pong, groups doing aerobics, a drill team practicing for a formal ceremony. The hangar deck has a couple of bays open to the ocean. It's a great view.

Night flight ops are about to begin. The delegation is going to vultures row to watch the take-offs and landings. Chad told me about a special spot to watch from, it's right along the flight deck where a team watches and guides the approach and grades each pilot on every landing. It's called the landing officer safety platform. I asked the XO about going there right after I had heard about it from Chad but the XO said no because it's dangerous and they don't put visitors there. I keep asking about it and he finally comes back and says the arrangements have been made.

I meet the safety officer, put on my life vest and helmet and we go under the flight deck. We go outside. There are no lights except a small flashlight that he's carrying. The stairs we go up have no railing and are very slippery. We're topside. The deck again is full of activity. We cross the flight deck to observe take-offs. We observe a few planes take-off but come back for the real show – the planes landing at night. The platform is right next to the runway. There are about eight sailors on the platform. I'm not sure what they all

do. The first plane is coming in. The lights are visible a couple of miles out. It approaches. The next thing you know is it's right next to you on the deck, going 135 m.p.h., full throttle, it catches the cable and two seconds later it's stopped. I witness this about six times. These kids are all doing a great job in making this ship operate a high level of professionalism.

Next stop the bridge for more details about the ship's operation. It's all very interesting. At about 11:30 pm I head for a separate intel brief. It's interesting to see how and what intel the ship collects and how they use it in their decision-making. We discuss their training, their equipment, cooperation from other intel agencies and our allies. Many things are working well, we highlight some areas for improvement. As we leave the intel discussion we walk by a flight-ops briefing room. Pilots and their crews are being briefed for tomorrow's operations. I stop and walk in. These specific crews will be leaving for Afghanistan to patrol in a couple of hours. The briefing ends and I pipe up just to express my thanks and appreciation to them for what they do. We talk for a few minutes. One of the crew members is from Michigan. That's one more family to call.

I stop to say hello to the young woman doing the briefing. She is from Michigan. Not from my district, but I ask her if she wants me to call home. Oh yes, she'd love it. It's three in the morning. It's time to go to bed.

Day 6, August 26

I'm up at 5 a.m. Tim Barney from Muskegon who been with me for a good part of the time that I have been on the ship will meet me at 5:30 to watch the sunrise. It's not a Michigan sunrise. The skies are hazy. I'm glad I got up, though. By the time we're on vultures row, the deck is already a hub of activity. They are unloading supplies off of a helicopter, the hangar elevator drops and they lower another helicopter and raise two fighters, a couple of fighter pilots gun their engines to check maintenance work performed during the night, still other people are moving missiles and bombs around on the deck. This is a city that never stops.

It's time to finish our agenda with breakfast and quick farewell with the Admiral and his staff. I've been impressed. As a nation we are capable of putting this floating platform halfway around the world to project our foreign policy, whether it is to maintain peace or carrying the war to those who might harm the American people. They do it with kids and great leadership. Our responsibilities as lawmakers is to make sure that we use this capability in proper ways and when we ask them to do something, we provide them with the resources to get the job done. These Americans are the front line and they are the ones that risk it all. They are being shot at. This is about real people doing what their leaders believe are the right things. This visit along with our visits to the troops reinforces that fact. These soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines are more than just that. They are husbands and wives, moms and dads, sons and daughters, and they may very well live in your neighborhood.

It's back onto the COD. Put on your helmet! Put on your life vest and get onto the plane. Soon this plane will be propelled from zero to 130 in 2 seconds. Belt yourself in, brace yourself and lower your head. Yes! The launch is unbelievable with the G's you pull. In two seconds we are airborne and headed back to Oman. The pilot asks who wants a straight in landing or an airbrake approach. We select the airbrake. An airbrake means the pilot will execute a sharp turn and slow down and we will drop like a rock. He does, we do. These sensations are O.K. for military flights, but I wouldn't want to experience it on Northwest. The delegation begins the approximately 10-hour flight (including refueling) to Morocco. It is uneventful. Just lots of time to get work done and catch a little sleep.

Our arrival early in Morocco allows for a little free time. At 8:00 p.m. we meet with Margaret Tutwiler, the U.S. Ambassador. This is a meeting that most members are not looking forward to. We have traveled all day, crossing four time zones. It feels much later than 8 o'clock, and for our body clocks, it really is. The meeting ends up being great and a breath of fresh air because of the message she delivers. She said that from a politician's point of view we need to re-evaluate what we are doing in all these countries. She believes we need to capture the hearts and minds of the people and get them to understand who we are and what American values and principles are. She indicated that terrorist organizations are active and we need to be also. She outlined one thing she has done. Previously when the U.S. donated materials or goods to hospitals or schools, we did it through third party groups and didn't take credit. That's dumb. People who receive our aid need to know where it came from. She now has stickers that say "Provided by the people of the United States of America." Just one small step in waging

a campaign to help the people of Morocco understand more about who we are and what our values are.



Hoekstra, U.S. Ambassador Margaret Tutwiler and the delegation discuss how to promote America.

The Ambassador is also visiting schools, giving them pictorial books of America and speaking with the

students about our values and principles. I indicated that if she expanded her program and developed a strategy where congressmen could help in these efforts I would commit to bringing six members to Morocco to help her visit schools and interact with students. We all visit schools back home. We should make it a component of winning friends and shaping the image of America around the world. This meeting was a pleasant surprise because of the unique perspective provided.

Day 7, August 27, 2002



Air Force Col. Judy Fedder, commander of U.S. Forces Azores, discusses the critical refueling and supply role her air base plays in the war on terrorism.

We are on the final leg home, with about nine hours flying time in between refueling stops. First stop, Lajes Air Base, in the Azores. We are met by Col. Judy Fedder from Manistee, MI. What a great and friendly lady. We present the special banner from Manistee and a couple of more banners. Judy indicates they will be displayed on the base and used during a special commemorative program for September 11. It's a quick refueling stop. About 50 minutes after landing we are back on the plane to Halifax, which is about four hours away.

We are scheduled to arrive back in at Andrews at 3 p.m. We arrive at 2:59:30. The CODEL started on time and ended on schedule. Not bad. Now it is time to digest all that we have learned and begin putting into a format from which decisions can be made.